

16. Paul forces the Corinthians to listen to him

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's open our Bibles together at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, and you'll find this on page 969 in our church Bibles, page 969.
- And I'm going to pick up from where we left off last week and start to read at verse 16, halfway through the chapter, and I'll read to the end of chapter 11.
- Paul has been telling the Corinthians about the false apostles that he describes as servants of Satan in verses 13, 14, and 15.
- And as he continues to speak to the Corinthians here, he's going to be contrasting the ways of the false apostles with his own ways as a true apostle. So 2 Corinthians 11, verse 16.
- I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool so that I too may boast a little.
- [1 : 0 6] What I am saying with this boastful confidence I say not with the Lord's authority but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.
- For you gladly bear with fools being wise yourselves. For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you or devours you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or strikes you in the face.
- To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that. But whatever anyone else dares to boast of, I'm speaking as a fool, I also dare to boast of that.
- Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ?
- I'm a better one. I'm talking like a madman. With far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes, less one.
- [2 : 1 2] Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea. On frequent journeys.
- In danger from rivers. Danger from robbers. Danger from my own people. Danger from Gentiles. Danger in the city. Danger in the wilderness. Danger at sea. Danger from false brothers.
- In toil and hardship. Through many a sleepless night. In hunger and thirst. Often without food. In cold and exposure. And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.
- Who is weak? And I am not weak. Who is made to fall? And I am not indignant. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.
- The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aratas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me.

[3 : 17] But I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall. And escaped his hands. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. And may the Lord make it a blessing to us this evening.

Well, let's turn again to 2 Corinthians chapter 11 on page 969.

Well, we come this evening to what must be one of the most extraordinary passages in this extraordinary second letter to the Corinthians.

I want to give this passage the title. Paul forces the Corinthians to listen to him. Forces the Corinthians to listen to him. I think we're immediately struck by the irony, the sarcasm, the scathing tone which Paul uses here, not in every verse, but quite frequently.

And certainly in verses 16 to 21. Just run your eye over that first paragraph, 16 to 21. And I think we're bound to ask, why does Paul use this kind of language?

[4 : 44] Irony is not his natural habitat. He doesn't normally speak in this kind of way. He's normally straightforward and plain and direct. I think the answer is that it was a kind of last resort for him.

It's as though he'd exhausted all the more normal channels of communication. And Paul was determined to get through to his Corinthian friends. They were slipping away from him and they were slipping away from Christ.

And the reason for that was that there was this group of leaders, influential people, who had infiltrated their way into the church at Corinth. Paul calls them false apostles. And they were clearly corrupting the thinking of the church members about the Christian life and about Christian truth.

Now, we sometimes ourselves use ironic language for a similar purpose of making somebody listen so as to force somebody to listen. Let me give you an example of this.

When I was a second year university student, I was not taking my university studies very seriously. What was a university for?

[5 : 52] I thought. Well, obviously it was for fun, music, friendship, all that kind of thing. My tutor, however, had different ideas about the purpose of a university.

And although he must have realized that in me, age 19, he had neither an Aristotle nor an Einstein, he decided one day to use what you might call last resort language.

On me, he perhaps thought I was just rescuable. So he said to me in a voice that was both quiet and savage, Mr. Lobb, your attitude to your work is not even that of a dilettante.

I went to my dictionary. I looked up that word and I discovered a dilettante was a person who messes about and takes nothing really seriously.

Now, I can tell you that scathing remark worked. It stung me and it humbled me. And that's exactly what my tutor was intending to do. And from that day forwards, I began to work steadily.

[7 : 02] I was still no Aristotle or Einstein, but at least I got a half decent result in my final exams. So that scathing language forced me to listen and forced me to change my ways.

Now, that's the kind of thing that Paul is trying to do here. He adopts this tone, which is so unusual for him. It's not his natural language, but he uses it to force the Corinthians to listen to him.

And if we wonder about his motive, just turn on to chapter 12, verse 19 for a moment. 12, 19. Halfway through the verse.

It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ and all for your upbuilding, beloved. That's his motive throughout his letter to build them up in their devotion to Christ.

And you see that telltale little word at the end of verse 19. He doesn't call them you brigands or you wretches. He calls them beloved. I will never understand 2 Corinthians well until we see how deeply Paul loved these wayward young Christians.

[8 : 08] Would he have spent so many laborious hours writing this wonderful letter if he didn't care very deeply for them? So his method may be irony, but his motive is love and his purpose is to build them up.

And in particular, at this point in the letter, he wants them to see why the teaching of their false apostles is so corrupting and why they should put their confidence once again in him as their true apostle and teacher.

Now, as we get into the passage, I think we'll find some important lessons for ourselves in how to live the authentic Christian life and how not to be duped by corrupting and wrong influences.

After all, false apostles didn't disappear at the end of the first century AD. There's always going to be plenty of false teaching about. And it's always much more dangerous when it appears within the churches.

That was the problem at Corinth. These false influences were there inside the church. They weren't millions of miles away from the church. And in the same way, people like us are not likely to be taken in by Muslim preachers or Hindu gurus.

[9 : 15] But we can be led astray by people of influence who profess to follow Christ but actually distort the gospel. That's what was happening here at Corinth. All right, eyes down now on our passage.

And I'll try to trace the direction that the apostle is taking. It's all about boasting. So verse 16, 11, 16. So that I too may boast a little.

Verse 17. What I'm saying with this boastful confidence. Verse 18. I too will boast. Verse 21, second half.

Whatever anyone else dares to boast of, I'm speaking as a fool. I also dare to boast of that. So in verses 16 to 21, he's telling them that he is about to boast.

He's saying, brothers and sisters, brace yourselves, open your ears, and prepare to listen to me recommending myself to you. He then begins to boast. Verses 22 to 29 are Paul's boast, or at least the first installment of it.

[10 : 18] And he's boasting there of his sufferings and hardships. Then look on to chapter 11, verse 30. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

But he hasn't finished yet. Chapter 12, verse 1. I must go on boasting. Verse 5. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast except of my weaknesses.

And then 12, 9. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. And then verse 11. I've been a fool in boasting like this.

You forced me to it. In other words, I've had to resort to commending myself. I should have been commended by you. But as you were unwilling to commend me with your mouths, I've had to do my own boastful self-commendation with my mouth.

So what Paul is doing throughout this section is saying to the Corinthians, look at my life. I'm going to talk to you about myself for a moment. Because in looking at me, you're going to see authentic Christian life and authentic Christian leadership.

[11 : 29] And then contrast what you see in me with what you see in your false apostles. And then if you've got any sense, you'll acknowledge that my way of life is true and godly, whereas their way of life is anything but.

Self-commendation, then, is what the apostle Paul is doing here. And yet Paul, deep within himself, revolts against the very idea of having to commend himself.

Because what he truly believes about boasting is what he said in the final two verses of chapter 10. Just have a look back to chapter 10, verse 17. Here's Paul's real take on boasting.

Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. That's what Paul really believes about boasting and commendation.

But he has to resort to this self-commendation because it's the only way in which he can force his readers to face up to their folly in allowing these charlatans to get a grip on their church.

[12 : 32] Now, this explains why Paul keeps on referring to himself as foolish. Look at verse 17 in our chapter 11. What I'm saying with this boastful confidence, I say not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool.

In other words, this is not really the Lord's way of talking. It's fool's talk. But I'm having to resort to it so as to make you wake up and smell the coffee. And then look at chapter 12, verse 11.

I've been a fool, but you forced me to it. But now look back at 11.16. 11.16. I repeat, let no one think me foolish.

Now, what he means is, don't think for a moment that I'm truly a fool. I'm not. But just for a few paragraphs, I'm going to play the fool and resort to something which I would not normally wish to do.

But you're forcing me to do it because it's the only way I can get through your rhinoceros skins and make you see the truth about false leadership and true leadership. Now, friends, for us today in 2013, the fact that Paul goes to such lengths to persuade his Corinthian friends to distinguish the true from the false should alert us to just how important that distinction is.

[13 : 49] It will become particularly important for people like us, and I'm looking here more at the younger ones for whom this is more likely to happen than for the older ones. But especially important for us when we have to move to a new city or a new country and we have to find a new fellowship to join a new church.

One of the critical questions we have to ask is, what brand of leadership is being exercised in this church? Is it in the style of Paul and Jesus or is it in the style of the false apostles at Corinth?

Well, let's turn now to our passage and we'll see how Paul contrasts the ways of these false apostles with his own lifestyle. First, let's look at the methods of the false apostles.

And I think Paul sums it up for the Corinthians there in verse 20, chapter 11, verse 20. For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you or devours you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or strikes you in the face.

Now, that is a verse describing how the false leaders are relating to the church members at Corinth. Paul has already told the Corinthians back in verse 4 about the content of their false teaching, how they proclaim a different Jesus and a different spirit and a different gospel.

[15 : 05] But verse 20 is not about what they're teaching. It's about their way of relating to others. And the thing that strikingly links verse 4 with verse 20 is that in verse 4, the Corinthians are prepared to put up with this false teaching readily enough.

And in verse 20, again, they bear, they're willing to put up with the behavior of the false leaders. They're accepting and allowing and condoning both teaching and behavior, which have no place in the church of Christ.

Let me give you J.B. Phillips' translation of verse 20, which I think brings out its flavor a little bit more. You don't mind, do you, if a man takes away your liberty, spends your money, takes advantage of you, puts on airs and even smacks your face.

Now that kind of leadership, which verse 20 is describing, is a leadership that enslaves people, shackles their lives, drains their wallets by coercion, and assumes an arrogant air of authority that is willing to humiliate people.

Smacking in the face, of course, can be a mental or verbal thing. It isn't necessarily a physical thing, but it refers to a type of relationship where the leader treats the people as if they were naughty children who need to be sent to the naughty stool.

[16 : 27] Now the enslaving element here may well refer to these leaders imposing religious rules. These interlopers almost certainly had what you could call a Judaizing agenda.

In other words, an agenda that said to the Corinthians, okay, Jesus is the Messiah, that's fine, but you've also got to stick to all the Jewish rules and regulations, circumcision and kosher foods, various days on the calendar to be carefully observed.

Paul, of course, taught that the gospel frees us from all those religious rules, that we're not saved by the observation of religious rituals. So these incomers are wanting to strap burdens onto the backs of the Corinthians from which Paul's gospel has recently released them.

Religion that is not gospel Christianity is, in the end, a form of slavery. These false apostles were slave masters. The congregation were losing their gospel freedom, and Paul simply could not bear to hear about it.

The false leaders were also devourers, verse 20, and advantage takers, which probably means that they were imposing unreasonable demands on the congregation's bank accounts.

[17 : 43] And don't you like this phrase? They were putting on airs. Putting on airs. I am a very important leader. That kind of thing. This church is beginning to appreciate what a blessing it is to have me in charge.

I am, after all, very well schooled in the higher reaches of Messianic Judaism. Anything that I don't know about the Hebrew Scriptures is, quite frankly, not worth knowing. You'll realize, of course, how wise it is to accept my direction in every area of your lives.

And if you're unwilling to be obedient, you will have to answer to me, and I will call you to account. Now, we've got to ask, does that style of leadership ever appear in churches today that bear the name of Christian?

Well, I'm afraid it does. And one of Paul's implications would be, don't join a church that has that kind of leadership. Where does it come from? There's something in the human heart that wants to dominate and bully other people.

And we see that disastrously in the figures of some of the notorious dictators and tyrants. But it can show up in churches. The Reverend Mr. Swagger and the very Reverend Dr. Jack Boot.

[18 : 57] But it's not the way of Jesus, and it's not the way of the Apostle Paul. Do you remember what Jesus said to his friends, his apostles, James and John, when they, or possibly their mother, were wanting them to have the best seats in the kingdom of heaven?

He said to them all, to all the apostles, the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you.

Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man, the person with the highest authority of all, even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So this leadership style that Paul is describing here in verse 20 is pagan and godless. If anybody here, and I'm sure there are some, aspires to be a leader in the Lord's Church, then verse 20 is a classic example of how not to do it.

Well, let's turn now from Paul's description of the false leaders and their way of life to his description of his own life. And this is where his so-called boasting begins. He starts in verse 22.

[20 : 12] Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Now those three questions seem to be saying exactly the same thing, but they're not quite.

Each phrase highlights a slightly different aspect of Jewishness. And almost certainly here in verse 22, Paul is answering a criticism made of him by the false leaders that he is in some way a renegade Jew, a Jew who's departing from the Old Testament because he's not insisting that Christians obey all the Jewish rituals.

So Paul is denying the charge that he is not being true to the Hebrew Scriptures. Now when he says, I'm a Hebrew, he probably means that he's not a Jew from the far-flung Greek-speaking corners of the empire.

He's a Hebrew of the Hebrews, educated in Jerusalem, fluent in the Hebrew language. Yes, born in Tarsus perhaps, but deeply steeped in the culture of Jerusalem and Judea.

And when he says, I'm an Israelite, he probably means I'm a member of the people of God with all the rights and privileges and heritage that are entailed in God's covenant promises.

[21 : 27] And when he says, I'm of the offspring of Abraham, he means my pedigree, my family pedigree, goes right back to the original source. I'm a full-blooded, true blue Jew.

And implied in verse 22 is Paul's understanding of the relationship between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel of Christ. What he means is, I'm Jewish.

I'm every bit as Jewish as my opponents, but I understand the Old Testament properly in a way that they don't. I understand the good news that Christ has fulfilled and brought to an end, the right of circumcision and the kosher food laws and so much else.

It is their Judaism that has gone astray, not mine. It's they, not I, who misunderstand and underestimate Christ. They accuse me of being a renegade Jew, but it's they, not I, who are misreading the Old Testament.

Now verse 23. When Paul says, are they servants of Christ, I'm a better one, he's not implying that they really are servants of Christ.

[22 : 37] He's told us clearly back in verse 15 that these false apostles are servants of Satan. What he means in verse 23 is that they claim to be servants of Christ.

They put themselves forward as servants of Christ, but they're no such thing. And he then tells us what the lifestyle of the true servant of Christ looks like.

So this is Paul's boast list in verses 23 to 29. In the ancient world, the world of Greece and Rome, emperors and generals and other leading people developed a convention of writing up their own eulogies.

So for example, the first of the Roman emperors, Augustus Caesar, wrote a pamphlet in his own honor, which listed his many fine accomplishments. It became known as the Res Gestae Divi Augusti, the achievements of the divine Augustus.

Great title to give to your own book, isn't it? Wouldn't you rather like to write a pamphlet in your own praise and honor, which listed all your fine achievements? It might go something like this.

[23 : 44] 1969, passed my Scottish hires, grades A, B, and C. 1977, married the prettiest girl in Bear's Den. 1981, climbed my 250th Monroe.

This is not autobiographical, by the way. I still haven't been up Ben Lomond. 1993, won first prize for the largest marrow in the MugDoc Park Country Show.

Now, seriously, how does Paul commend himself? How does Paul write a boastful pamphlet in his own honor? Could it be something like this? I have preached the gospel all over the eastern Mediterranean.

I've established more churches than any other pioneer evangelist. I've preached to more ethnic groups. I've raised far more money. I've journeyed far more miles.

I've won far more converts. I've written far more books. I've attended more councils of the church. I've prayed more fervently. I've spoken to the biggest crowds. And I've performed the most spectacular miracles.

[24 : 52] All that was true of Paul, wasn't it? No lies there. But it's not what he writes here. He writes not of his achievements, but of his sufferings.

Let's fix our eyes for a few moments on that list of sufferings that runs from verse 23 to verse 29. Why does Paul go into all this detail about the hardships he'd endured?

I mean, he might have saved himself some parchment and ink if he'd simply said in verse 23, I've suffered a great deal in the course of my life and work. But he doesn't say that.

He painstakingly lists over 20 categories of severe suffering. And I think that if we really want to understand Paul's life and the character of his Christian leadership, we need to become familiar with this list.

It's not the best-known passage in his writings, is it? But we need to become familiar with this list. I would suggest that sometime this week, before all this goes out of mind, you set aside 20 or 30 minutes and sit down and think hard about these things that he lists.

[25 : 59] And if you can do that without being deeply moved, I'd be very surprised. Nobody who's familiar with this list of sufferings could ever be a triumphalist or an arrogant Christian.

I won't run through every item, but we'll look at just some of them. Verse 23. Far greater labors. He was an indefatigable toiler.

Far more imprisonments. In Paul's 30 years of evangelistic work, running from roughly 35 AD to 65 AD, he probably spent something like three to five years in total behind bars.

Then he mentions countless beatings. Countless. Lost count of the number of times. I haven't been beaten once. If I did, I guess I'd burst into tears and ask for a month's sick leave.

Often near death, he then says. Then look at verse 24. Five times, the Jews gave Paul the 39 lashes. Now, the instrument used by the Jews for this particular punishment was a scourge made of three thongs.

[27 : 16] The central one apparently made of calf hide and the outer ones made of the hide of an ass. And this scourge with its three thongs on it would be brought down across the prisoner 13 times.

Now, just think about it. Three thongs. Three times 13 equals 39. That's the 40 lashes less one. He'd be lashed first across the front from shoulder to navel, then turned over and lashed across the back.

Now, Paul must have been extraordinarily tough to have survived that because many prisoners died after the 39 lashes. Paul had it five times. And who gave it to him?

The Jews, whom he deeply, deeply loved. There's a lot of detail in this list which Luke leaves out in the Acts of the Apostles.

But Paul here is forcing the Corinthians to think about all this because he wants them to understand what it can mean to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

[28 : 17] Now, verse 24 is a Jewish punishment. Verse 25, beating with rods. That's a Roman punishment. Then he says, once I was stoned.

We find that recorded for us in Acts 14. I think he was at the town of Lystra. Then he says, three times shipwrecked. And chronologically, that cannot have included the great shipwreck that's recorded for us in Acts 27.

I'll move on a bit more quickly. A night and a day I was adrift at sea, I guess after one of those shipwrecks clinging to a piece of wreckage. It's simply beyond our ken, isn't it?

Beyond our ability to imagine. How could anybody survive all these things? And then, in addition to all the external hardships and sufferings that he mentions, there's the internal suffering mentioned in verse 28.

Paul so loves the churches, all of them, and he so wants them to flourish and he so wants them to be able to stand firm in the face of the pressures of paganism and persecution.

[29 : 31] And then there's this strange cry in verse 29, which arises straight out of the concern for the churches that we see in verse 28. Verse 29, who is weak and I am not weak?

That's a cry of great love for those in the churches who feel weak or who feel tempted into sin. He's saying, if any brother or sister feels weak and low and troubled, be assured, I've been there too.

I know what it is to feel weak. The Acts of the Apostles record a number of moments in Paul's life when he was very weak and very discouraged. He records more of it at the very beginning of 2 Corinthians in chapter 1.

Now, can you imagine the domineering swaggerers of verse 20 ever being able to empathize with Christians who are really struggling and feeling really weak?

And in the second half of verse 29, Paul shows how deeply he cares for the Christian who is made to fall into sin by people such as the false apostles who are undermining the godly life of the ordinary Corinthian Christians.

[30 : 36] Christians. Now, these verses from 23 to 29 are bound to raise a question in our minds. And the question is, are all Christians supposed to suffer like this?

Is my Christian life inauthentic because I can't match Paul's life story with my own? Well, the answer surely is no. The great majority of Christians over the last 20 centuries have not had to suffer like this.

If I think of my own life, I can hardly identify with a single one of the sufferings that Paul mentions. Prison, beatings, lashings, stonings, shipwrecks, a drift at sea.

I did fall off a boat once in the River Thames. But somebody fished me out and I suffered no harm. These sufferings of Paul, they're quite beyond anything that I've experienced, and I guess that's true of most of us here this evening.

But the point is not that all Christians are called on to suffer as severely as Paul, but that there is a principle. This is the point. There's a principle to be established in our lives, and it's established the moment we're converted, and the principle is of being ready to suffer for the gospel whenever the demands of our situation require it.

[31 : 59] Now, in this country, in the UK, in the foreseeable future, 20 years or so, Christians, I guess, are most unlikely to be lashed or stoned in the way that Paul was.

But prison, that's by no means impossible. Trends in recent legislation are making it harder and harder for Christians to stand firm on some of the central issues of our faith and practice.

Two areas, in particular, are going to give us great trouble and are starting to give us trouble already. First, there are questions questions of sexual morality and secondly, questions about the truth of Christianity in relation to other religions.

Let me make a suggestion that each of us should regularly rehearse a scene in our minds. And the scene goes like this. Picture yourself being arrested by the police in this country and taken before a court where you're examined because it is suggested or charged against you that you've broken a law.

And the examination takes place like this. Is it true, Mr. Lobb, that you believe and have said publicly that Christ is the only savior and that Islam and Hinduism are false faiths?

[33 : 18] Yes, it is true. And is it true, Mr. Lobb, that you believe and have said publicly that all homosexual activity is sinful? Yes, it is true.

We shall have you back in two weeks' time for sentencing. And we need to rehearse that kind of scenario in our minds and be prepared to be unashamed of Christ and his words, whatever pressure is put upon us.

Think of it, Paul would have avoided all this suffering if he had just kept his mouth shut. So the principle is I need to be prepared to suffer for the gospel in any way that is required by the culture and the politics of the country that I live in.

So a Christian living in a country like Pakistan or a number of the Middle Eastern countries is likely to have to bear far more suffering than we in Britain, at least for the moment. But the principle is the same.

Be prepared to suffer for the gospel rather than keep quiet about Christ. and in this way we will follow the example of Paul who was himself following the example of Jesus.

[34 : 31] Jesus is the fountainhead of this pattern. He suffered in order to accomplish the work given to him by his father and Paul did exactly the same thing and we are called to set our faces against the standards of the world and be willing to suffer to any degree if the situation requires it.

If you're a Christian when you meet the Apostle Paul in the new creation why not ask him a question? I'm sure you'll get the opportunity.

Don't ask him to explain some knotty point in the epistle to the Romans. Why not ask him to unbutton his shirt and show you by his scars what it cost him to teach the church to lay down its life for Christ?

So Paul boasts of his sufferings. They authenticate him as a true Christian leader and indeed as a true Christian.

When you look back at verse 20 to Paul's description of the lifestyle of the false apostles you realize that nobody who lives in the style of verse 20 is ever going to be willing to suffer in the style of verses 23 to 29.

[35 : 47] We're now finally and briefly let's look at verses 30 to 33 which act as a kind of introduction to Paul's theme in the first half of chapter 12. In verse 30 you'll see he turns from boasting about his sufferings to boasting about the things that show my weakness.

The sufferings show the strength of the world's hatred of the gospel and the world's scorn of the gospel but the weaknesses tell us something about Paul's inner life and indeed about our own inner lives.

Now he's going to go on to talk about his famous thorn in the flesh in chapter 12 and we'll come to that next week but here at the end of chapter 11 he mentions something rather surprising.

Look at verse 32. This is going right back to his conversion. At Damascus the governor under King Aratas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Now what he means is wasn't I weak and cowardly to get into a big basket probably a basket used for selling fish a whopping great basket wasn't I weak to get into a big basket and get my friends to lower me down out of a window down the city wall by night in order to escape those who were trying to kill me.

[37 : 07] Now this incident which is recorded in Acts chapter 9 just after Paul's conversion shows Paul dramatically converted on the road to Damascus and then we read in Acts 9 that after his conversion Paul stays in Damascus for a number of days begins to preach the gospel but the Jews in Damascus hate him for it plot to kill him and no doubt get in touch with the city governor to help them to catch Paul.

So Paul decides to show a clean pair of heels gets out of harm's way under cover of darkness into the basket and down the city wall. Now the interesting thing is that in Acts chapter 9 Luke records the incident completely factually.

Paul escaped their hands and then went back to Jerusalem. Luke makes no suggestion or hint that Paul was being weak and watery. But here in 2 Corinthians 11 Paul is clearly saying that as he looks back on his life he's rather ashamed of being so lily-livered and yet he boasts of his weakness.

He parades it and he's going to go on to say in chapter 12 verse 9 therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

The power of Christ is shown demonstrated not through strong Christians who are constantly flexing their spiritual biceps and telling people how powerful they are but rather through Christians who know their weaknesses and gladly admit to them.

[38 : 40] Well I hope we'll get much further into that next week and I hope it will be an encouraging message for us. But here's a final thought. Paul is teaching us not to boast of strength or success.

A church that presents itself to the world as being filled with power and strength and dominance is in danger of being a church like that of the false apostles of Corinth.

Domineering, self-glorifying and self-commending. Paul teaches us to be quick to recognize and admit our weakness. You know the line from the old Welsh hymn I am weak but thou art mighty.

Paul could have written that line in 2 Corinthians. A church that is full of itself cannot be simultaneously full of Christ. But a body of Christians who acknowledge and speak of their weaknesses is a body of Christians through whom the power and beauty of Christ shines out to the world.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear Lord Jesus, it amazes us to think of the way in which Paul in his life was so deeply prepared to follow the pattern of your own suffering and how nothing stopped him speaking out even though it cost him so much.

[40 : 17] We do pray for ourselves that you'll help us to become more and more deeply, deep in our hearts willing to suffer for you and to be unashamed of the gospel and the implications and ethical implications of the gospel.

Help us to be brave and unafraid but we confess to you that while we want to be brave we are weak and we ask you therefore to comfort us through the Apostle Paul's message here and indeed to strengthen us, give us a strength beyond ourselves so that even this week when we're faced with moments of challenge we will not be ashamed of you and we ask it for your dear namesake and for your glory.

Amen.